

50 YEARS OF THE MEKONG BASIN A CHALLENGING BATTLEFRONT FOR THE U.S

NGO THE VINH

*To the 20 million inhabitants of the Mekong Delta
who are deprived of their voice
To US Secretary of State Marco Antonio Rubio
To the Friends of the Mekong Group*

With an inconsistent and always “pivoting” policy, with a negligible total investment, over the past 50 years since 1975, the United States has made almost no positive and effective moves to prevent China’s expansion and encroachment – not only in the Mekong River basin – but also in the East Sea. To be able to counterbalance Beijing, of course, Washington needs to have a strategic vision, accepting a commensurate price to pay in order to restore its long-standing influence on the Mekong River Chessboard. NGO THE VINH

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INTRODUCTION: Over the past thirty years, tens of millions of people living in the Mekong River basin have suffered from increasingly severe and frequent floods and droughts. Their food sources in the basin have gradually depleted and the living environment is no longer healthy to support them and their children. These disadvantages are largely due to the hydropower projects of China and Laos, accumulated from upstream, which have been brought down on them. China is the culprit and the main driver of the projects in Laos. This region is an important geopolitical dispute between China and the United States. Step by step, China has completed 12 of the largest dams on the Mekong mainstream, despite all the protests from the people and the authorities in the lower basin. The United States has been powerless against all these developments from the beginning and has recently withdrawn its trump card, not allowing the Mekong Dam Monitor (MDM), an organization that monitors and reports on the activities of reservoirs across the basin, to operate. This paper by Dr. Ngo The Vinh, a persistent environmental activist, presents the inconsistent US Mekong strategy as a failure in the Mekong River basin. PHAM PHAN LONG, PE

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TOUBA / 托巴 : ANOTHER 12TH MAINSTREAM DAM IN YUNNAN



Figure 1: *Tuoba / 托巴, China's 12th mainstream dam in Yunnan, has been detected and monitored by US satellites: left, the construction site of Tuoba Dam (as of 29.01.2024), right, Tuoba Dam 1,400 MW has filled its reservoir during the dry season (as of 23.06.2024) and is starting to have further negative impacts on the flow of the Mekong River downstream. [source: Stimson Center / Mekong Dam Monitor]*

TUOBA / 托巴: A SPECTACULAR DISCOVERY BY MDM

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) after 30 years of operation [1995-2025], is considered ineffective, has not prevented any mainstream dams on the Mekong River, and has achieved only a few very symbolic achievements such as: an agreement to share information among the 4 member countries, establishing and putting into use an "internet network" to predict floods and monitor dry season flows; and signing an agreement with China [April 2002] to exchange hydrological data. But over time, it has been seen that this agreement is only in form, Beijing has never really wanted to exchange this information with the Mekong River Commission and the 4 downstream countries!

The recent discovery of the Tuoba / 托巴 hydroelectric dam, on the main stream of the Lancang River (Lancangiang / 澜沧江) – the Chinese name for the Mekong River in Yunnan, is the 12th mainstream dam with a capacity of up to 1,400 MW (equivalent to the Manwan / 漫湾 dam). China quietly started construction without any official notification to

the MRC and the 4 downstream countries [Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam], but the Tuoba dam was discovered and monitored by the “eyes” of the US, satellite system MDM (Mekong Dam Monitor) from the beginning of construction until the completion of filling the reservoir with water. The discovery was only possible thanks to MDM using satellite images to monitor the entire Mekong River basin. In March 2023 Stimson Center released imagery from Planet Labs showing that the Tuoba dam had completed construction and started taking water into the reservoir around February 2024. In less than five months (June 2024), it is estimated to have reached its maximum capacity of 1,215 billion cubic meters of water. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/mekong-dam-monitor-annual-report-2023-2024/> [Figure 1]

HOW IMPORTANT IS MDM – EYES ON EARTH?

China completed its first hydroelectric dam, the Manwan Dam, on the Lancang-Mekong mainstream in 1995 in secret, thus meeting no opposition. They have continued to build, and by 2020, China has completed a cascade of 11 big dams, and despite their impact, China has not shared data with any of the Mekong countries. During that time, there have been no official cabinet-level objections from any of the Mekong’s neighbors, and only diplomatic warnings from the United States. In December 2020, after 15 years of unilateral action by Beijing, the United States finally took action and established the Mekong Dam Monitor (MDM) to report all information about Mekong dams in real time, publicize the operations of the reservoirs and their environmental impacts on the Mekong River basin.

MDM is an open-source online system capable of near-real-time monitoring of hydroelectric dams and their environmental impacts in the Lancang-Mekong River basin. The project is a result of a collaboration between the Stimson Center's Southeast Asia Program and Eyes on Earth, Inc. MDM uses remote sensing, with satellite images analyzed through a Geographic Information System (GIS) to provide near real-time information and download data with many previously unknown indicators in the Mekong River Basin. These data are widely available for public use and research, and can be downloaded completely free of charge.

The information from MDM is extremely essential for Mekong countries – of course including Vietnam, a farthest downstream country. Some of the potentials of MDM include:

- _ Cascade Analysis: Active Storage in Lancang Cascade 2016-2025
- _ Modeling the natural flow of the Mekong River through monitoring stations 1992-2025

- _ Comparing Maps and Data over time such as: Rainfall, Surface Wetness Anomaly, Precipitation, Surface Temperature Anomaly
- _ Basin-Wide Dams and Connectivity

Spotlight: January 6 – 19, 2025

- _ Mekong Floodpulse holds steady in early January
- _ Where is the Water? How wet is the Mekong basin? How much water in reservoirs by county? How much water in the largest reservoirs? How strong is the flood pulse? How wet is the Mekong Floodplain? How do Dams Impact Different points along the Mainstream?

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The Stimson Center MDM project team alone currently consists of five people: with two co-leaders, Alan Basist and Brian Eyler, along with two communications and assistant members, Regan Kwan, Courtney Weatherby, and Claude Williams, a Research Fellow.
<https://www.stimson.org/project/mekong-dam-monitor/>

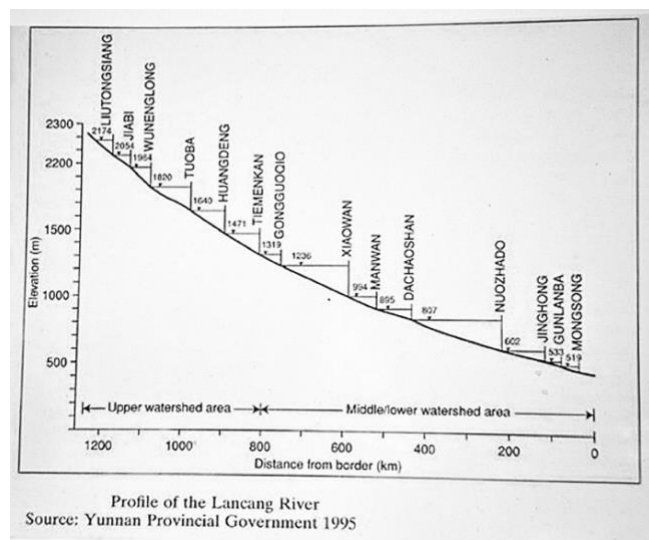


Figure 2a – In 1995, according to Profile of the Lancang River, Source: Yunnan Provincial Government, there were 14 cascade dam projects on the Lancang River (澜沧江 / Lancang River Cascade). Longitudinal Profile of the 14 cascade dams in Yunnan.

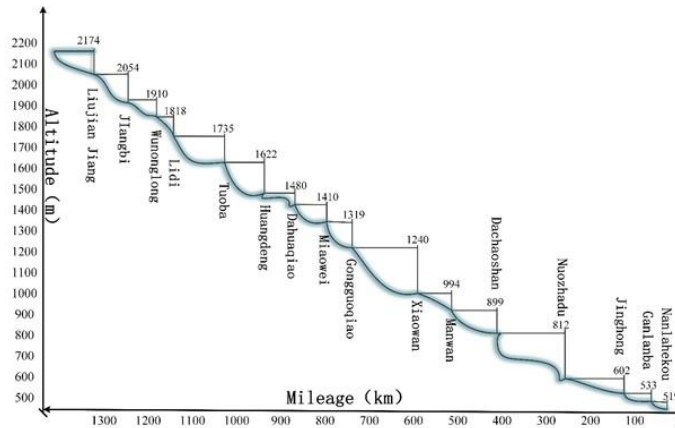


Figure 2b: In 2019, according to EOForChina <https://www.eoforchina.env.dtu.dk/field-sites/lancang>, there are currently 16 cascade dam projects on the Lancang River. The Longitudinal Profile shows that as of January 2025, **12 of the 16 Yunnan Cascade dams have been completed.** [Updated by Peter Bauer-Gottwein on August 29, 2019]



Figure 2c: Locations of 12 completed mainstream dams on the Lancang-Mekong River. As of February 2024, the 12th mainstream dam, Tuoba, has been completed and China has not notified the downstream countries or the Mekong River Commission (MRC). Environmental experts who have been closely monitoring the Lancang-Mekong River exploitation for a long time have come to the same conclusion: **“China has not left a good track record.”** [Source: Stimson Center map as of February 2024, Mekong Dam Monitor 2024] <https://www.stimson.org/project/mekong-dam-monitor/>

BRIAN EYLER’S CALL FOR HELP FROM STIMSON CENTER.ORG

On Friday morning, January 24, 2025, Pham Phan Long PE, a constant companion of the writer for 30 years on the Mekong River, forwarded a Facebook message from Brian Eyler, Director of the the Stimson Center’s Southeast Asia as follows:

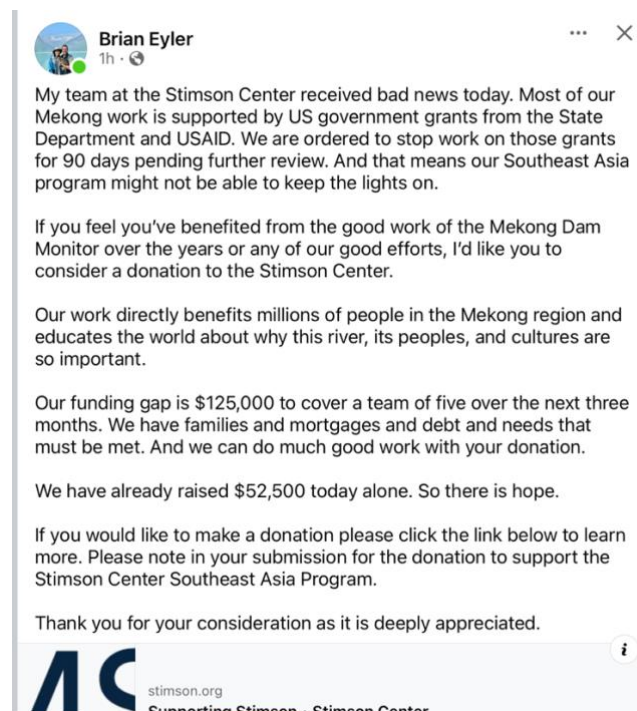


Image 3: Screenshot from Brian Eyler’s Facebook at 4:25 pm on January 24, 2025 [source: Pham Phan Long]

“Brian Eyler:

My team at the Stimson Center received bad news today. Most of our Mekong work is supported by US government grants from the State Department and USAID. We are ordered to stop work on those grants for 90 days pending further review. And that means our Southeast Asia program might not be able to keep the light on. If you feel you’ve

benefited from the good work of the Mekong Dam Monitor over the Years or any of our good efforts, I'd like you to consider a donation to the Stimson Center.

Our work directly benefits millions of people in the Mekong region and educates the world about why this river, its peoples, and cultures are so important.

Our funding gap is \$ 125,000 to cover a team of five over the next three months. We have families and mortgages and debt and needs that must be met. And we can do much good work with your donation.

We have already raised \$ 52,500 today alone. So there is hope.

If you would like to make a donation please click the link below to learn more. Please note in your submission for the donation to support the Stimson Center Southeast Asia Program. Thank you for your consideration as it is deeply appreciated.” **Brain Eyler.**



Figure 4: Brian Eyler, with an MA from the University of California, San Diego and a BA from Bucknell University, Pennsylvania, leads the Stimson Center's Southeast Asia Program and Energy, Water, and Sustainable Development Program. An expert on transboundary issues in the Mekong region and China's economic cooperation with Southeast Asia, Brian has spent more than 15 years living and working in China and has conducted extensive research with stakeholders in the Mekong region. He is a leading voice on environmental, energy, and water security issues in the Mekong. Brian is co-leader of the MDM. Author of *Last Days of the Mighty Mekong*, published by Zed Books in 2019.

What Brian Eyler calls “Bad News” comes from here:

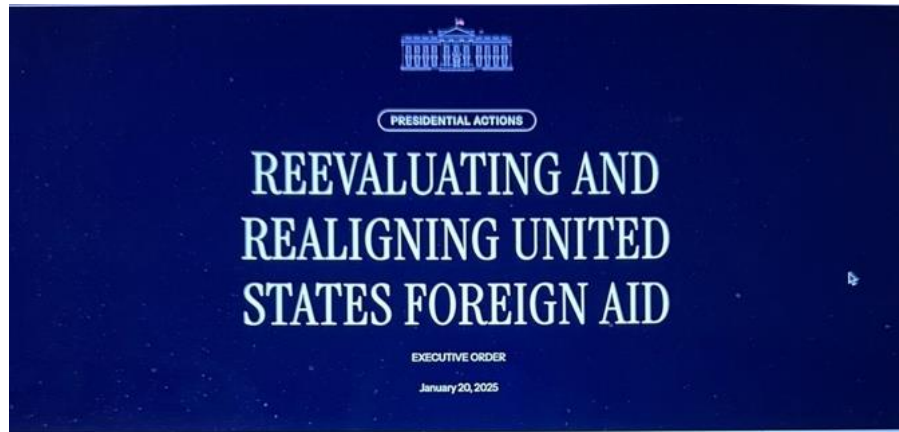


Figure 5: Presidential Order. *Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid.*

Executive Order, signed January 20, 2025: 90-day global funding cut off to reassess and reorganize U.S. Foreign Assistance. And the Stimson Center is one of the victims of that decision.

By virtue of the authority vested in me as President under the Constitution and laws of the United States, I hereby order the following: Quoted from Sections 1, 2, and 3(a) & (e)

Section 1. Purpose. The foreign aid industry and the United States bureaucracy are inconsistent with U.S. interests and in many cases are contrary to U.S. values. They serve to destabilize world peace by promoting ideas in foreign nations that are diametrically opposed to harmonious and stable relations within and among nations.

Section 2. Policy. It is the policy of the United States not to disburse any additional U.S. foreign assistance in a manner that is not fully consistent with the foreign policy of the President of the United States.

Section 3. (a) Suspend U.S. foreign development assistance for 90 days to evaluate programmatic effectiveness and consistency with U.S. foreign policy. All department heads and agencies responsible for U.S. foreign development assistance programs shall immediately suspend new obligations and disbursements of development assistance funds to foreign countries and to nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, and contractors currently implementing them, pending a review of such programs for program effectiveness and consistency with U.S. foreign policy, which shall be conducted within 90 days of this order. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) shall implement this suspension through its appropriations authority"... (e) with the

exception of emergency food assistance and military funding for the two countries of Israel and Egypt. [End of citation] THE WHITE HOUSE, January 20, 2025.

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CHRONOLOGY OF A HALF-CENTURY OF THE US POSITION IN THE MEKONG RIVER BASIN

After the Vietnam War in 1975, all US troops withdrew from Vietnam, the absence of the US in Southeast Asia left a geopolitical vacuum, and this was also an opportunity for an ambitious China to quickly fill it. With Beijing's expansion from economy to military increasingly weighing on the countries in the Mekong River basin, coupled with China's aggressive moves towards: "*Tibetization of the South China Sea*", in the very figurative language of B.A. Hamzah, of the Malaysian Maritime Institute (MIMA), has directly threatened America's vital interests, so it is time for the US government to pay attention to the rise of China, the world's most populous country that is rapidly emerging as a superpower both economically and militarily. Beijing is not only competing fiercely but also has ambitions to surpass the US in the next decade of this century. Even more dangerous, in the words of Jane Perlez, of the New York Times, **it is a "zero-sum game"**. Therefore, the US's return to Southeast Asia must be a strategical necessity process, not a coincidence. The United States is one of the long-standing sponsors of the MRC, and has also provided aid to the Mekong countries, and has an influential voice in the world's major banking organizations such as the World Bank/ WB and the Asian Development Bank/ ADB... With that position and proactive actions, the United States hopes to regain its position, or at least have a "counterbalancing role" to somewhat limit China's influence in the entire basin.

A START FROM THE EXECUTIVE: LOWER MEKONG INITIATIVE/ LMI 2009

From the ASEAN Conference, on July 23, 2009, at the request of the United States, there was an additional sideline meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the 5 countries: the US side was Hillary Clinton, along with the 4 Foreign Ministers of the Lower Mekong region including Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam in Phuket, Thailand. Representing Vietnam at that time was Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem, who is also Deputy Prime Minister.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized the importance of the Lower Mekong region and the role of each country in the basin to the United States, along with a commitment to support the promotion of peace and prosperity for the ASEAN region as a whole. The foreign ministers of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam welcomed

closer US cooperation with the Lower Mekong countries in areas of mutual significance to ensure sustainable development in the region.

This was followed by a statement, relating to issues of common concern, especially in the areas of Environment, Health, Education, and Infrastructure Development in the region.

The US State Department also expressed concern about the negative impact of hydroelectric dams on “*food security*” in the region, including the importance of Mekong fish as a major source of protein for residents. The five foreign ministers discussed the issue of “*climate change*” and how to respond effectively. They reviewed ongoing efforts and agreed to explore new areas of cooperation; and particularly welcomed the “Sister-River Partnership” initiative to share expertise in climate change adaptation, flood and drought management, hydropower development and impact assessment, water resources management, and food security.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) aims to facilitate and coordinate responses to basin-wide development challenges through technical information exchanges, training workshops, and study visits.



Figure 6: In July 2009, at the ASEAN Summit in Phuket, Thailand, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that “**the United States is back in Southeast Asia.**” In July 2012, at the Lower Mekong Initiative Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Phnom Penh, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a new and long-term commitment by the United States to continue supporting the Lower Mekong Initiative, which has been in place since 2009. Now part of the Asia Pacific Security Engagement Initiative. Third from left: US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, second from left Vietnamese Secretary of State Pham Binh Minh. [source: photo by Heng Sinith]

With only 22 million USD allocated – too little, to say the least – for environmental programs in the four Lower Mekong countries; part of that budget is also used for the “*Twin Agreement between the Mekong and Mississippi River Commissions*” and for USAID to study the impact of climate change on water resources, food security and the lives of people in the basin.

According to Aviva Imhof, former Director of Communications for the International Rivers Network, the US Geological Survey/ USGS can provide technical support in collecting data on hydrology, ecology, sediment flows and water quality, ensuring that this information is widely disseminated to the public.

The LMI is seen as having some influence on the development dynamics in the basin, and drawing attention to the geopolitical issues that are being challenged. Although initially insignificant, the US re-engagement with the Mekong and ASEAN nations could prompt China to pay more attention to the communities and governments of the lower Mekong River.

SENATOR JIM WEBB AND THE U.S. LEGISLATURE

Former Senator Jim Webb has been a prominent figure in the U.S. legislative community for more than a decade as an environmental activist, a strong voice in protecting the Mekong River and its people. In a press release, Senator Jim Webb affirmed: “*The United States and the world community have a strategic commitment and a moral obligation to protect the health and well-being of the people who depend on the Mekong River for its resources and their way of life.*” [Former Senator Jim Webb’s Press Releases 12/ 08/ 2011]

Along with the voice of the State Department on the Executive Branch, there was a resonance with the Legislative Branch, the U.S. Senate. Senator Jim Webb, as Chairman of the Senate East Asia and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee, has been active for many years in preventing irreversible environmental damage from dams on the upper Mekong River. In 2009, Senator Webb made a two-week trip through five Southeast Asian countries to examine Mekong River development projects and trans-basin water use practices. He also mobilized many US diplomats, policy makers, environmental experts and scholars to pay attention to the risks of disrupting the ecological balance of the Mekong River and the importance of the Mekong River in the economic and social development of Southeast Asia.



Figure 7: Prime Minister Hun Sen – who has always supported all Chinese dam projects on the Mekong River, is receiving Senator Jim Webb on August 19, 2009 during his trip through 5 Southeast Asian countries to survey Mekong River development projects and cross-basin water use methods. [source: Office of Senator Jim Webb]

On September 23, 2010, Senator Jim Webb also held a hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the topic: “**Challenge to Water and Security in Southeast Asia**”. In addition to the voice of Joseph Yun, Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia, the Executive Branch, there were also authoritative and prestigious voices from NGOs from The Stimson Center such as Richard Cronin [R. Cronin was the previous head of Brian Eyler], International Rivers Network such as Aviva Imhof, and Dekila Chungyalpa from the Greater Mekong Program World Wildlife Fund for Nature.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee later approved a resolution calling on US representatives where multilateral development banks must strictly adhere to “international environmental standards” in any funding for hydropower projects on the Mekong mainstream. The resolution serves as a reinforcement of support for the MRC to follow the PNPCA “prior consultation process” for each dam project and also calls on both Myanmar and China to increase cooperation with the MRC.

US SENATE RESOLUTION 227 [July 7, 2011]

Mr. Webb (for himself, Mr. Inhofe, Mr. Lugar, and Mr. Kerry) submitted the following resolution; which was referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations

WITH AN AMENDMENT [December 1, 2011] Reported by Mr. Kerry, with an amendment, an amendment to the preamble, and an amendment to the title

RESOLUTION

Calling for the protection of the Mekong River Basin and increased United States support for delaying the construction of mainstream dams along the Mekong River.

Whereas the Mekong River is the world's 12th longest river, originating on the Tibetan Plateau and flowing nearly 3,000 miles down through China into Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam;

Whereas the Lower Mekong River in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam is a source of freshwater, food, and economic opportunity for more than 60,000,000 people;

Whereas the Mekong River is second in biodiversity only to the Amazon River, with an estimated 1,500 different species of fish, of which at least a third migrate up the river and tributaries in their life cycle, including the majority of the commercial fish catch;

Whereas the Mekong River supports the world's two largest rice exporters, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as the world's largest inland fishery of 4,000,000 tons of freshwater fish per year, providing up to \$9,000,000,000 annual income and approximately 80 percent of the animal protein consumed in the Lower Mekong Basin;

Whereas China is constructing up to 15 dams along the mainstream of the Upper Mekong River, and Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam are planning to construct or finance the construction of up to 11 dams on the lower half of the river's mainstream;

Whereas scientific studies have cautioned that mainstream dam construction on the Mekong River will negatively affect the river's water flow, fish population, and wildlife;

Whereas the Mekong River Commission is a river basin management organization including the Governments of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam that have signed the Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin, done at Chiang Rai, Thailand, April 5, 1995, and agreed to cooperate on management of the river and "development of the full potential of sustainable benefits to all riparian States";

Whereas the members of the Commission have also agreed to "make every effort to avoid, minimize and mitigate harmful effects that might occur to the environment, especially the water quantity and quality, the aquatic (eco-system) conditions, and ecological balance of the river system, from the development and use of the Mekong River Basin water resources or discharge of wastes and return flows";

Whereas the Mekong River Commission sponsored a Strategic Environmental Assessment of the proposed series of mainstream dams along the Lower Mekong River, concluding that the mainstream projects are likely to result in serious and

irreversible environmental damage, losses in long-term health and productivity of natural systems, and losses in biological diversity and ecological integrity;

Whereas such changes could threaten the region's food security, block fish migration routes, increase risks to aquatic biodiversity, reduce sediment flows, increase saline intrusion, reduce agricultural production, and destabilize the river channels and coastline along the Mekong Delta;

Whereas the United States has significant economic and strategic interests in the Mekong River subregion that may be jeopardized if the construction of mainstream dams places the region's political stability at risk;

Whereas the Department of State initiated the Lower Mekong Initiative in July 2009 to engage Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam on water security issues, to build regional capacity, and to facilitate multilateral cooperation on effective water resources management;

Whereas funding for the Lower Mekong Initiative has primarily focused on the environment, health, and education, leaving the fourth pillar—infrastructure—largely unfunded;

Whereas attention to infrastructure development is a critical element of promoting the coordinated construction of hydropower dams in the region;

Whereas, on September 22, 2010, Laos submitted for review to the Mekong River Commission the proposal for the Xayaburi Dam, the first of nine mainstream dams planned by Laos along the Lower Mekong River;

Whereas, on April 19, 2011, the Mekong River Commission's Joint Committee representatives met to discuss the Xayaburi project without reaching consensus on whether the project should proceed, but agreed during the meeting to table the decision and consider it at a later date at a higher, ministerial level; and

Whereas, on May 8, 2011, the Government of Laos agreed to temporarily suspend work on the Xayaburi dam and announced plans to conduct further environmental assessments on the project in response to regional concerns: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved,

That the Senate—

(1) calls on the United States Government to recognize different national circumstances of riparian states along the Mekong River, including their energy and natural resource profiles, and to support the development of cost-effective base load power that meets electricity generation needs, promotes economic growth, and alleviates poverty;

(2) calls on United States representatives at multilateral development banks to use the voice and vote of the United States to oppose financial assistance to

hydropower dam projects on the mainstream of the Mekong River that have not been adequately coordinated within the region and would impose significant adverse effects on the environment, population, and economic growth along the river and its basin;

(3) encourages greater United States engagement with the Mekong River countries through the Lower Mekong Initiative and increased support for energy and water security in Southeast Asia;

(4) calls on the United States Government in leading the Lower Mekong Initiative to devote greater attention to capacity building projects on energy and water infrastructure;

(5) applauds the decision of the Government of Laos to temporarily suspend work on the Xayaburi Dam in response to regional concerns;

(6) supports delay of the construction of mainstream hydropower dams along the Mekong River until the comprehensive environmental assessments have been completed and adequate planning and multilateral coordination has been achieved;

(7) calls on all riparian states along the Mekong River, including China, to respect the rights of other river basin countries and take into account any objection or concerns regarding the construction of hydropower dams;

(8) encourages members of the Mekong River Commission to adhere to the prior consultation process for dam construction under the Commission's Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement;

(9) calls on the Governments of Burma and China to improve cooperation with the Mekong River Commission and information sharing on water flows and engage in regional decision-making processes on the development and use of the Mekong River; and

(10) supports assistance to the Lower Mekong River riparian states to gather data and analyze the impacts of proposed development along the river.

Amend the title so as to read: **“A resolution calling for states in the Mekong River Basin, including China, to respect the rights of all riparian states along the Mekong River and for increased United States engagement in promoting the resolution of multilateral water sovereignty disputes.”**

<https://www.congress.gov/112/bills/sres227/BILLS-112sres227rs.xml>

SECRETARY OF STATE MIKE POMPEO AND THE LOWER MEKONG INITIATIVE

On August 1, 2019, also at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Bangkok, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reiterated the 2009 Lower Mekong Initiative of his predecessor, Hillary Clinton, and also criticized China for building hydroelectric dams on the Mekong mainstream, which have seriously affected downstream countries.

“The river's water level is at its lowest in a decade, a problem related to China's decision to withhold water from upstream dams.”

Pompeo also mentioned China's blasting, dredging, river patrols outside of its area, seeking to impose rules on river management, and thus weakening the role of the Mekong River Commission.



Figure 8: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (third from left), Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh (second from right) at the Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok, Thailand on August 1, 2019, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Lower Mekong Initiative 2020. [Source: US Embassy in Vietnam]

Secretary Pompeo also spoke of the commitment of the United States and Japan to cooperate with the countries in the Mekong River basin to deal with difficulties. The Japan-US Mekong Power Partnership [JUMP], will build power transmission networks in the region, and the United States has pledged to contribute more than \$29 million. And the US government is working with Congress to provide \$14 million in assistance to the Mekong countries to deal with transnational crime, human trafficking, prevent wildlife trafficking, and deal with the spread of drug smuggling from the Golden Triangle. These

are only very symbolic aid programs but in terms of strategic value they are very fragmented...

THE 2009 LOWER MEKONG INITIATIVE IS NOW A THING OF THE PAST

The US's return to Southeast Asia through the LMI has now been 16 years (2009-2025), almost becoming a thing of the past! Meanwhile, China is in a superior position in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) compared to the US in many areas:

_ China has the advantage of geographical access, owning half of the length of the Lancang-Mekong River flowing through 6 countries instead of the US, which is an entire ocean distance.

_ China owns 12 giant mainstream dams in Yunnan on the upper stream, making the Mekong River "a water tower and power plant" of China. _ China has been expanding SEZs/ Special Economic Zones "Made in China" in the basin [Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam] with human resources and infrastructure capable of lasting long term.

_ China has a military force that has been authorized to openly patrol the Mekong River outside of Chinese territory since December 2011 to protect security and economic privileges.

_ China is exploiting the division of ASEAN and the Mekong countries, typically the rift between the three Indochina countries with Cambodia and then Laos separating from Vietnam to gradually enter Beijing's orbit.

_ China has an almost unlimited source of money, is a creditor of the United States, and has more than enough capacity to finance infrastructure projects and mainstream dams in the lower Mekong River.

In addition to money from China, exploiting hydropower on the Mekong River is now much easier when investment capital can also come from commercial banks in the region such as Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam... instead of having to be funded by large international financial organizations in which the US has great influence such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank as before.

IN LIEU OF EPILOGUE

The writer wonders: where is the strategic position of the United States in the Mekong River Basin today? With an inconsistent and always "pivoting" policy, with a negligible total investment, over the past 50 years since 1975, the United States has made almost no positive and effective moves to prevent China's expansion and encroachment – not

only in the Mekong River basin - but also in the East Sea. US officials from the Executive to the Legislative branches have long talked about the commitments to the expanded role of the United States in the Mekong River Basin [the State Department's LMI 2009 with only 22 million USD allocated – too little, to say the least, the US Senate's Resolution Res. 227]...

If we compare the total USD investment of the United States and China, we can see that there is an ocean of distance. For example:

_ **BRI** ([Belt and Road Initiative](#)), is a global infrastructure and economic development strategy launched by China in 2013. Beijing has invested an estimated 1,000 Billion USD in BRI. It aims to enhance trade and investment connectivity between Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond through large-scale infrastructure projects, including roads, railways, ports, and energy networks.

_ **AIIB** ([Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank](#)) also initiated by China in 2016 to finance infrastructure projects in Asia and beyond. Headquartered in Beijing, it aims to enhance connectivity and economic development through investments in sectors such as transportation, energy, water, and urban development. The AIIB is capitalized at USD 100 billion and operates with a focus on sustainability, innovation, and regional connectivity.

It has become clear that since 1975, Washington's policy has lacked strategic substance, causing the United States to lose its "foothold" in the Mekong River region. Now, if it loses its MDM "vision" in the entire basin, the inevitable consequence is that the United States has almost suffered a strategic defeat in the Mekong River region. In the current "nearly zero-sum game" ⁽³⁾ between the United States and China. To be able to counterbalance Beijing, Washington needs to have a strategic vision, accepting a commensurate price to restore its long-standing influence on the Mekong River Chessboard.

NGO THE VINH MD

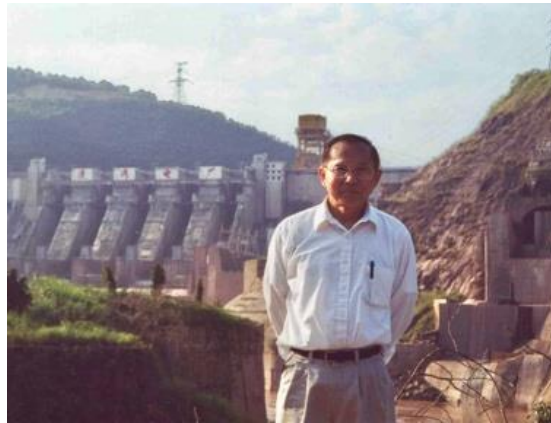
California 01.29.2025

REFERENCE:

1. *Challenge to Water and Security in Southeast Asia; U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations; Presiding: Senator Webb, Thursday, September 23, 2010; <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/hearing/?id=4c2fd291-5056-a032-52fd-414f26c49704>*
2. *In The Senate of The United States: The full text of S. Res. 227 (as passed July 7, 2011), (Mr. Webb, Mr. Inhofe, and Mr. Lugar) A resolution calling for the*

protection of the Mekong River Basin and increased United States support for delaying the construction of mainstream dams along the Mekong River.

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